



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## Vineetha Mokkil: An Interview

Naomi Therese Jose

*Vineetha Mokkil's fiction is a perpetual search, raising provocative questions and gently urging readers to ponder over the answers. It reflects her deep interest in history and politics as well as her acute and often startling insights into human behaviour. Larger socio-political concerns and a rich tapestry of emotions blend into her work seamlessly. Both are handled with a deft touch and quiet humour. Mokkil uses language with a surgeon's precision. Starkly beautiful, her sentences cut to the bone and capture the raw ache of human experience with acute sensitivity.*

*A collection of her short stories, A Happy Place and Other Stories (HarperCollins) was published in April 2014. Her fiction has appeared in the The Santa Fe Writers Project Journal, The Missing Slate, Cha: an Asian Literary Journal, Sugar Mule Review and in the anthology Why We Don't Talk (Rupa and Co). Mokkil is busy finishing work on a novel, which interweaves two narrative strands set in different time frames: one in 1950s Tibet, and the other in contemporary Delhi.*

*Vineetha Mokkil likes to write in quiet places. Her dream writing space is a room with a view of the mountains. However, she finds ways to 'carry on writing in the heart of chaotic cities'. We meet at a café in a relatively less hectic part of south Delhi on a blazing summer day.*

**NTJ** When did you start writing fiction? What factors do you think have contributed to your becoming a writer?

**VM** Like most writers I am a voracious reader. I developed a love for reading very early in life. As a child I would pester the adults in my family to buy me books. Stories were fascinating for so many reasons. I couldn't get enough of them. Reading the stories others had written made me want to spin yarns of my own.

**I** was also attracted to movies and plays because they had stories to tell. My grandfather used to tune into radio dramas regularly. He taught me to appreciate the theatre and helped me develop a sharp ear for dialogue, which is a useful tool to have in a writer's arsenal.

**NTJ** Let's talk a bit more about your love of theatre. Did you ever act? Were you comfortable being on stage?

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**VM** I was cast in student productions in school and at university. Playing a role was like living a whole other life. It let me slip into the skin of characters whose experiences were very different from mine.

Acting and writing have a lot in common. As a writer, I am always trying to get under the skin of my characters and see the world through their eyes.

**NTJ** Your first book happens to be a collection of short stories. How hard was it to get a short story collection published?

**VM** The short story is an exciting and powerful form. But for some misguided reason, it tends to get treated as a second-class citizen. The novel is considered a noble pursuit. The short story has no such aura and many agents and publishers prefer to keep their distance from it. However, in spite of an initial round of rejections, I managed to find an agent who was impressed by the collection and agreed to represent it. Not long after, I found a publisher and signed a contract.

**NTJ** In your short story collection, *A Happy Place*, Delhi – India's sprawling capital – becomes the centre of several displaced lives. The city is as much a character as the people whose lives the stories in your collection trace. How would you describe your relationship with the city?

**VM** Delhi is a shape-shifter. Like a mythical creature it has the ability to take on many forms. It is a city that contains a multitude of cities within it. The more you think you are getting closer to its heart the more it slips away from you. It can be chaotic, cruel, kind, aggressive, tender, open and secretive all at the same time. The place is teeming with stories. I walk around the city with my eyes and ears open and let the stories find me.

**NTJ** One of the things I find interesting about your collection is the multiplicity of voices in it. For example 'A Happy Place' tells the story of a harassed nanny in the third person. 'Life on Mars' is narrated in the first person by a disenfranchised young man. 'A Quiet Day' slips into the third person to tell the story of a Kashmiri widow whose life is shattered by political strife. How do you decide what voice suits a story best?

**VM** Every story demands its own voice. I don't impose any decisions on it. The first person voice is more intimate. It has the cadence of a whisper. It speaks directly to the reader and there are stories that need to be told that way. But the third person is equally effective when used wisely. Like I said, it's all about deciding what voice suits a particular story best. The voice is tailored to suit the story. I work on it till I find the perfect fit.

**NTJ** In the story, 'Other Lives', a young woman who is arrested for shoplifting decides to turn around her life. She says, 'I freeze, then take a deep breath and march on. I don't know where I am headed. But I'll keep walking till I find my own road'. This acute sense of awareness of the moment – possibly a turning point – crops up in most other stories in your collection as well.

**VM** There is hope in these stories and darkness too. They reflect the harshness of our world and its unexpected mercies. The stories in *A Happy Place* are linked by universal human emotions – love, anger, hate, hope, and even indifference. They string the stories in the collection together.

**NTJ** A short story doesn't give you room for an extended description of the space in which the action takes place. How do you work around this limitation?

**VM** I don't see this as a limitation most of the time. Compression is a virtue that only short fiction can teach you. When I write a story I pick and choose the most telling details to describe a setting or set a mood. These details convey the essence effectively to the reader. It doesn't matter if I don't have two pages to describe something. Two sentences will do the job nicely. To draw a parallel: when you click a photograph you pick the details that encapsulate the essence of the picture and zoom in on them. A short story follows the same principle.

**NTJ** How do you begin a story or novel? Does it start with an idea, a character, or a sentence that haunts you?

**VM** This question reminds me of E.L. Doctorow's comment – 'a book begins as a private excitement of the mind'. When an idea possesses me (I use that word deliberately), I know it is the start of something worth pursuing. Anything can be the trigger – a conversation in the street, a sudden upheaval in a friend's life, a newspaper report I happened to read, a walk down a deserted alley, a wait at a crowded airport. There is no saying what will set off that spark.

**NTJ** You are working on a novel in which the struggle for Tibetan independence plays a pivotal role. What was the spark for writing it?

**VM** The yearning for freedom is at the heart of this novel. If I had to label the book in a line I would call it a cry for freedom in a shackled world. There are two narrative strands in the novel – one set in Tibet in the 1950s, and the other in contemporary Delhi. Both trace the trajectories of individual lives that are trapped in the maelstrom of history.

**NTJ** Did you have everything – the plot, structure, and the ending – planned out before starting work on your novel?

**VM** I pieced together the story in my head and decided that the best way to tell it would be to move back and forth in time. So in that sense I had the structure planned out at the start. But I don't stick to a plan in terms of the story – I let it evolve and find its way forward. It surprises me often and I enjoy that immensely. The same holds true for the characters. Though they are my creations, they take on a life of their own. I give them room to grow. I am not a dictatorial writer – we share an open relationship.

**NTJ** How challenging has it been to write about a different place and time i.e. Tibet in the 1950s?

**VM** Research has been the most challenging part of the process. I am free to invent characters but I have to be accurate about historical details and cultural specifics. I did some extensive reading on the period to collate facts related to Tibet's history, geography and political life. I also hunted for sources that would give me authentic details about Tibetan culture and language. Gathering information was a lot of fun and also backbreaking work.

**NTJ** What role does revision play in your writing process?

**VM** Revision is crucial. You sink or swim depending on its efficacy. I revise extensively – starting with sentences, moving on to paragraphs, and then on to entire chapters. I keep at it till I am convinced that the draft couldn't possibly get any better.

**NTJ** Who are your favourite writers? Which of them have particularly influenced your work?

**VM** My list of favourites is long. To name a few: Amitav Ghosh, Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy, Nadeem Aslam, Toni Morrison, Paul Auster, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Lydia Davis, T.C. Boyle, Margaret Atwood, J.D. Salinger, Hilary Mantel. I think that everything I read influences me in some way. But to be specific, Michael Ondaatje's work is an inspiration. The lyricism of his prose, the staggering scope of his vision and his grasp of history and global politics are all influences. To me, he opens up the possibilities of fiction like no other writer does.

**NTJ** Are there any other influences that enrich your craft?

**VM** Film as a medium has taught me a lot about pacing, editing and weaving the pieces of a story together. Music has a touch of ethereal grace that I aspire to add to my writing. Poetry plays around with language with perfect ease. That sense of freedom and sense of play are essential for good prose as well. So reading poetry goes a long way in helping me to write better prose.

**NTJ** Other than writing is there any other medium you would like to experiment with?

**VM** If I had the necessary skills to compose music I would be a composer. Film is a fascinating medium and I would like to direct a documentary or feature some day. I am always on the lookout for interesting subjects so something may materialise in the future. I enjoy photography. My camera goes with me on my travels.

**NTJ** Does personal experience play any part in shaping your fiction?

**VM** That's a tricky question. The answer to it is yes and no. I don't just write about the things that happen to me. That would be nothing but endless and tiresome autobiography. But I do take aspects of reality – the lives of people around me, events unfolding in our time – and build my fiction around them. Isn't all art ultimately a raid on the real?

**NTJ** You lived in New York City when you were a graduate student at New York University. How did the city and the time you spent on campus influence your writing life?

**VM** I was surrounded by creative people in the city. Writers, poets, playwrights, artists, musicians – all of them were caught up in something exciting. That sort of creative energy is hard to find elsewhere. I felt like I was plugged into a power source that would never dry up. It's a shame that exorbitant living costs are driving writers out of New York these days in droves.

The NYU campus is fertile ground for aspiring writers. Many writers whose work I had read and admired from a distance would come by to give readings or talks. I got to hear fine writers like Paul Auster, Charles Simic, Lydia Davis and Rick Moody among others. Some stellar writers including E.L. Doctorow, Chuck Wachtel and South African poet, novelist and painter Breyten Breytenbach, taught classes in creative writing as well.

**NTJ** Do you see yourself writing a novel set in New York?

**VM** A sense of place is a crucial part of fiction. Often writers receive flak for setting their fiction in places they don't call home. I find this criticism absurd. The concept of home and identity – especially in a globalised world – is fluid. I am not saying that you can parachute into a place for two days and claim to know it. But if you can move beyond the superficial and get under its skin, you are free to tell its stories. If Hemingway hadn't given us *A Moveable Feast* or Adam Johnson hadn't written *The Orphan Master's Son*, the world would be a poorer place. I may wake up one day and write a story set in New York or Barcelona or Santa Fe. What's to stop me!

**NTJ** Your work has a deep engagement with issues of class and gender. Do you think fiction in general has an obligation to engage with socio-political issues?

**VM** Writers don't live in a vacuum. So it is natural for socio-political concerns to seep into our work. Every writer has her or his own way of engaging with the world. What you believe in will show through in the fiction that you write.

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*Naomi Therese Jose is currently pursuing her MPhil in English Literature at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. Her areas of interest include postcolonial subjectivity, globalisation and formation of identities and narratology. Her other interests include playing the piano.*

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